

US presidential campaign: Romney denounces secularism in bid for Christian fundamentalist backing

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In a speech Thursday, former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, a leading candidate for the Republican presidential nomination, offered himself as an ally of the Christian fundamentalist right in the struggle against secularism, declaring, “Freedom requires religion,” an assertion that denies the right of those who are non-religious or atheists to be free from religious observance and indoctrination.

Romney’s speech is a measure of how far to the right the US political system has shifted, and the degree to which both officially recognized political parties have subordinated themselves to the most backward and reactionary forms of religious dogmatism.

The degree to which the prejudices of the religious right are driving the Republican campaign was widely noted in the US press coverage of the speech. *Time* magazine commented, “Speaking at the George Bush Presidential Library in College Station, Texas, Romney countered questions about his Mormon faith by throwing down an implicit question of his own to religious conservatives: Who are you more afraid of—Mormons or secularists?”

While Romney was at pains to compare his remarks to the celebrated speech by John F. Kennedy in 1960, in which Kennedy addressed his relationship to the Roman Catholic Church, the content was the opposite.

“I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute,” Kennedy declared, in the most famous passage of his 1960 speech. “I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant nor Jewish—where no public official either requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the Pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source—where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials.”

Any Democratic or Republican politician who dared make such a statement today would face a rapid end to his or her political career, with anathemas from the Christian fundamentalist right, the Roman Catholic Church, and much of the media.

Kennedy based his speech on the proposition that his religion would not determine his policies in the White House. Romney’s speech asserted that public policy must be based on religion, while arguing that his Mormonism has enough in common with Christian fundamentalism to insure that he will carry out the dictates of the religious right.

In the course of his presidential campaign, Romney has abandoned the comparatively tolerant stance he took on social issues in Massachusetts and embraced every nostrum of the religious right: a ban on abortion, prohibition of stem cell research, anti-gay bigotry, across-the-board state promotion of religion.

The former governor expected that combined with his billion dollar personal fortune, which makes him the best-financed Republican candidate, significant support from the Christian fundamentalists would enable him to win the nomination. But he encountered what was described in the media as the “Mormon problem”—the widespread belief among evangelical Christian groups that Mormonism is a heretical or even Satanic cult.

Romney had rejected calls to address the issue so long as he was leading in the polls in Iowa, whose January 3 caucuses are the first contest in the campaign for the presidential nomination. In the last few weeks, however, former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee has overtaken Romney in polls of Iowa Republicans by means of an aggressive campaign directed mainly at evangelical churches and “home schoolers.” An ordained Baptist minister, Huckabee has presented himself as “a Christian

leader” in an obvious effort to distinguish himself from Romney and appeal to anti-Mormon bigotry among the fundamentalists.

To counter Huckabee, Romney now seeks to assure the religious right that he, too, is one of them. “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of mankind,” he said in the Texas speech—as though that had anything to do with an election to choose the next occupant of the White House.

He added, “My church’s beliefs about Christ may not all be the same as those of other faiths. Each religion has its own unique doctrines and history. These are not the basis for criticism but rather a test of our tolerance.”

While appealing for Christian fundamentalists to tolerate Mormons, however, he was not so tolerant towards Americans who belong to no organized religion or reject religion altogether. “Freedom requires religion just as religion requires freedom,” he said. “Freedom and religion endure together, or perish alone.” In other words, those who reject religion are not, or perhaps *should not* be free.

Espousing one of the main distortions of the religious right, Romney claimed that “in recent years, the notion of the separation of church and state has been taken by some well beyond its original meaning.” He castigated the defenders of the constitutional principle of separation of church and state for seeking “to remove from the public domain any acknowledgment of God.” He continued, “Religion is seen as merely a private affair with no place in public life. It is as if they are intent on establishing a new religion in America—the religion of secularism.”

For all Romney’s vilification, secularism is not a religion. The separation of church and state leaves individuals free to worship or not, as they see fit, without any government prohibition or encouragement. One of the epoch-making and entirely progressive features of the American Revolution was that it dealt a major blow against the use of state coercion to enforce the subordination of mankind to various forms of religious dogma.

The prohibition of the establishment of religion was a vindication not only of the rights of dissenting Protestants against the Church of England, and of Catholics and Jews, but of the rights of nonreligious minorities to be free of any form of state-promoted religious observance. It means not merely freedom for rival religions to compete with each other—which Romney advocates—but freedom for those who reject any form of religion.

It is this tradition that has come under increasingly

frenzied attack from fundamentalist preachers and the Roman Catholic hierarchy over the past 30 years, with their mounting demands that specific religious doctrines on abortion, gay rights, and other political issues be enacted into law and imposed on the entire population.

Turning history on its head, Romney claimed in his speech that the US Constitution, the first in the world to mandate the separation of church and state, was somehow founded on religious principles. “The founders proscribed the establishment of a state religion,” he said, “but they did not countenance the elimination of religion from the public square. We are a nation ‘Under God,’ and in God we do indeed trust.”

In fact, the pledge of allegiance, whose daily recitation is required of most US school children, was devised only in the 1890s. It made no mention of religion, with the words “under God” added only during the early 1950s, at the height of McCarthy witch-hunt, to distinguish patriotic Americanism from “godless communism.”

The Constitution makes no mention of such religious conceptions as the basis of the political organization of the country. It explicitly bans any religious test to hold any public office: the president may adhere to any religion, or none at all.

The United States was founded on what Lincoln once described as the “political religion” of democracy and popular sovereignty, in which power is derived from the consent of the governed, freely expressed in elections, not from the divine right of kings or any other form of religious authority.

In concluding his speech, Romney made the usual denunciation of terrorism and “radical Islamists” who engage in “violent Jihad,” although there is no essential difference, from an ideological standpoint, between the all-encompassing claims of the Islamic fundamentalists and those of their Christian or Jewish counterparts.

“We face no greater danger today than theocratic tyranny,” Romney declared, seemingly oblivious to the fact that such a regime is precisely the logical outcome of the precepts of the Christian fundamentalist right, before whom he prostrated himself.



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